

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

# The Next Big Thing: Half Bottles

Top-Flight Wines Are Increasingly Showing Up in Smaller Sizes

**W**HILE WE WERE preparing for Dottie's most recent spinal surgery, we got a great idea for an utterly unexpected holiday present—no, not an entirely new skeletal system (although, if you happen to see that in one of those specialty catalogues, let us know), but something for a wine lover in your life. Here's what happened:

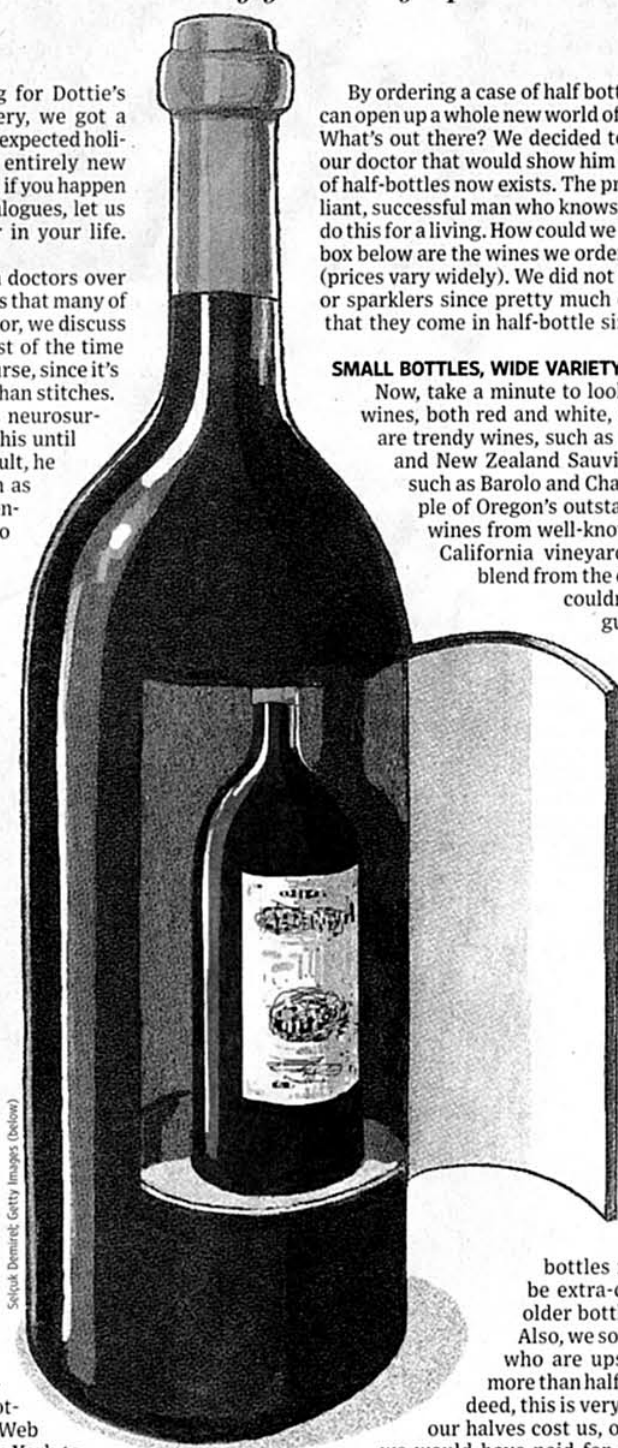
We've spent a great deal of time with doctors over the decades and one thing we've learned is that many of them love wine. Whenever we visit a doctor, we discuss what ails us a little bit—and then the rest of the time talk about wine. This is fine with us, of course, since it's much more fun chatting about Sémillon than stitches.

We've known for years that Dottie's neurosurgeon loved wine, but he'd never told us this until now: His wife doesn't drink wine. As a result, he said, he doesn't enjoy fine wine as often as he'd like because he would never drink an entire bottle and wouldn't want any to go to waste. We hear variations of this all the time, and not just from surgeons. We get notes from husbands who don't want to give up good wine while their wives are pregnant; from wives whose husbands don't drink at all; from couples who are getting older and feel they can no longer share an entire bottle; from mixed couples—that is, those where one partner only drinks white and the other only drinks red; and from single people who enjoy wine but don't want to waste any.

## A EUREKA MOMENT

These people usually contact us because they want to know how to store an opened bottle of wine. But our doctor's lament provided us a eureka moment for the perfect gift for all of these people: a case of outstanding wines that happen to be packaged in half bottles. Many people still believe that only bubbly, sweet wines and second-rate still wines come in half bottles, but that hasn't been true for some time. Back in 2000, we first wrote about the surge of half bottles, partly driven by the famous chef Thomas Keller, who asked more than 200 top wineries to produce half bottles for his restaurant, The French Laundry. More than two years ago, we wrote about the increasing number of half bottles offered in restaurants—twice as many as five years earlier, according to one expert.

Look closely at many fine wine stores and you'll be surprised at the selection of good wines now available in half bottles. Many of the biggest and best wine Web sites—from sherry-lehmann.com in New York to brownderby.com in Missouri to winelibrary.com in New Jersey to winex.com and klwines.com in California—allow you to search specifically for half bottles, and they have good selections. There's even a site called halfwitwines.com, based in San Francisco, that only sells halves and claims to offer more than 1,000.



Setrak Demirek/Getty Images (below)

By ordering a case of half bottles for a friend, you really can open up a whole new world of wine enjoyment for them. What's out there? We decided to order a case of wine for our doctor that would show him that a very wide selection of half-bottles now exists. The pressure was on: He's a brilliant, successful man who knows his wine and he knows we do this for a living. How could we impress him? Listed in the box below are the wines we ordered and the prices we paid (prices vary widely). We did not include any dessert wines or sparklers since pretty much everybody already knows that they come in half-bottle sizes.

## SMALL BOTTLES, WIDE VARIETY

Now, take a minute to look over that list. There are wines, both red and white, from six countries. There are trendy wines, such as Austrian Grüner Veltliner and New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, and classics, such as Barolo and Chablis. There's a good example of Oregon's outstanding Pinot Noir and two wines from well-known and often hard-to-find California vineyards, including a Cabernet blend from the excellent 2001 vintage. We couldn't believe we found an August Kessler Spätburgunder. That's Germany's name for Pinot Noir and it's from an excellent producer in the Rheingau region, but we rarely see this wine in any size.

Finally, we were pleased as punch to be able to find Lynch-Bages red and white in half-bottle size. We love the white—we're crazy about white Bordeaux, and this is consistently one of our favorites—but it can be hard to find, and the opportunity for our doctor to taste these together, or in close proximity, is exciting.

## HANDLE WITH CARE

When you're buying half bottles, remember that smaller

bottles may age more quickly, so be extra-careful to make sure that older bottles have been stored well. Also, we sometimes hear from people who are upset that half bottles cost more than half of regular-size bottles. Indeed, this is very broad, but it appears that our halves cost us, overall, about 60% of what we would have paid for full-size bottles. But this

shouldn't be a surprise to anyone who knows that smaller sizes of Tide cost more, ounce for ounce, than larger sizes. (Although it's also true that magnums of fine wine can cost more than twice a regular-size bottle. That's because larger bottles are often rare and can be prized, both because they are unusual and because they age well.)

Here's our advice if you have friends who think they can't enjoy wine fully because they can't enjoy full bottles: Call around to local stores to see which has the widest selection of halves (be sure to say you're not looking for dessert wines or Champagne). If you strike out, hit the Internet; hopefully, either you or your giftees will live in a state to which wine can be shipped. Order a mixed case of reds and whites from all over the world. And enclose a card that tells your friends to drink these up.

You might also want to tell your friends that half bottles have a useful afterlife, too, because when they do open a full bottle and find they have half of the bottle left over, they can rinse out one of the halves and pour in the remaining wine. Fill to the top, cork it—and have another lovely half bottle for the next night.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).

## A Halves Dozen

Here are the 12 half-bottles that we chose to give our doctor as a special gift. It's impossible to know what half-bottles you might find, but many wine shops now offer a pretty good selection. If you order wine online, it's a good idea to pay for express delivery, especially now that cold weather has arrived in much of the country.



**Loimer Grüner Veltliner 2004**  
(Langenlois) Austria. \$13

**Château Lynch-Bages 2004**  
(Paulliac) France. \$45

**Olivier Lafaive Chablis**  
"Les Deux Rives" 2004  
France. \$14

**Domaine Henri Perrot-Minot**  
Gevrey-Chambertin 2005  
France. \$46

**Patz & Hall Wine Co. Chardonnay**  
"Dutton Ranch" 2005  
(Russian River Valley)  
California. \$24

**Von Strasser Winery Red Wine**  
"Sori Bricco Vineyard" 2001  
(Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley)  
California. \$32

**Blanc de Lynch-Bages 2003**  
(Bordeaux) France. \$25

**Michele Chiarlo Barolo "Tortoniano"**  
2001 Italy. \$27

**August Kessler Rheingau Spätburgunder Trocken "Cuvée Max"**  
2003 Germany. \$35

**Cristom Vineyards Pinot Noir**  
"Louise Vineyard" 2004  
(Willamette Valley) Oregon. \$27

**Isabel Sauvignon Blanc 2006**  
(Marlborough) New Zealand. \$12

**Altisino Brunello di Montalcino**  
2001 Italy. \$34

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Watch John and Dottie taste and talk about wines that come in half bottles, at [WSJ.com/Tastings](http://WSJ.com/Tastings).